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The Evolution of Strategic and Coordinated Bargaining Campaigns in the 1990s: The Steelworkers' Experience

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Abstract

"With the refocusing of attention of the labor movement on organizing, an increasing number of scholars have been directing their research toward the nature and practice of current union organizing efforts. These scholars have begun updating a literature that had grown sorely out of touch with the organizing experience of America's unions and have provided the foundation for a more sophisticated understanding of the organizing process. While we applaud this resurgence in organizing research, there has not been a comparable resurgence in research on collective bargaining…"

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CHAPTER NINE

The Evolution of Strategic and Coordinated Bargaining Campaigns in the 1990s

The Steelworkers' Experience

Kate Bronfenbrenner and Tom Juravich

With the refocusing of attention of the labor movement on organizing, an increasing number of scholars have been directing their research toward the nature and practice of current union organizing efforts (Bronfenbrenner, et al. 1998; *Labor Studies Journal* 1999). These scholars have begun updating a literature that had grown sorely out of touch with the organizing experience of America's unions and have provided the foundation for a more sophisticated understanding of the organizing process.

While we applaud this resurgence in organizing research, there has not been a comparable resurgence in research on collective bargaining. Yet the tremendous growth of contract campaigns, or what alternatively have been called coordinated or strategic campaigns, has been no less significant than the revolution in union organizing. Beginning with the early efforts of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers (OCAW) at BASF and of the United Mineworkers at Pittston Coal to more recent campaigns such as the Teamsters at United Parcel Service and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HERE) at the Frontier Hotel, the labor movement has used these campaigns with increasing success. Although organizing is important for the revival of American labor, strategic and coordinated contract campaigns are equally essential to labor's effort to rebuild and revitalize the movement. Without these campaigns, unions will continue to lose as many new workers as they gain, and newly organized workers will never be able to achieve contractual guarantees for the rights and protections for which they risked so much in the organizing process.

Collective bargaining and contract campaigns matter because they are the focal point for the power and voice that workers can achieve only through unionization. Collective-bargaining campaigns are also the forum in which unions and union members most connect with customers, clients, and the broader public. When successful, these campaigns result in a significant expansion of union organizing opportunities, bargaining leverage, political clout, and a concomitant shift of public support toward unions. When they fail, as the labor movement learned so painfully with the Professional Association of Air Traffic Controllers (PATCO), they undermine labor's efforts for years to come.

Much of the recent collective-bargaining research, however, still clings to an older industrial relations model that focuses either on large industry analyses (Voos 1994), economic cost benefit analysis (Kaufman 1992; Card 1990), behavioral models of bargaining (Walton and McKersie 1991; Wheeler 1985), or strategic-choice models (Kochan, Katz, McKersie 1994; Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld, McKersie 1994). There has been an increase in union training materials on contract and strategic campaigns (AFA 1997; AFL-CIO 1985b; SEIU 1988; Rogers 1994) as well as a smaller literature critical of the use of these campaigns by the labor movement (Northrup 1996; DiLorenzo 1996). However, aside from Getman's work on the United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU) strike at International Paper (1998), Rosenblum's book on Phelps Dodge (1995), and our book on the Steelworkers' campaign at Ravenswood Aluminum Corporation (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999), there have been few detailed analytic studies of corporate and strategic campaigns.

In this chapter we trace the evolution of the use of strategic campaigns by the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) over several decades. This research is based on a series of in-depth analyses of six coordinated Steelworker campaigns that occurred between 1985 and 1997. The research began with a major study of the Ravenswood campaign (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999), followed by subsequent studies conducted with our students on campaigns at USX (formerly US Steel) (Batchelor and Clark 1998), the Northern Indiana Public Service Company (Clark and Hammer 1998), Bayou Steel (Seroka 1998), Wheeling Pitt (O'Malley 1998), and Bridgestone/Firestone (Balfour et al. 2000). For the Bridgestone/Firestone campaign we also relied on a study conducted by Nancy Lessin (1998). The research for all six campaigns is based on interviews with major participants and a review and evaluation of campaign documents.

Phelps Dodge: The World Turned Upside Down

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the USWA, like most other industrial unions, developed a system of industry-wide pattern bargaining. This allowed them to negotiate with a number of employers simultaneously, using their combined power and leverage to standardize terms and conditions of employment to the highest common denominator. By the 1980s, however, this system of pattern bargaining was under attack.

Early in 1983, the Nonferrous Industry Conference, led by USWA Secretary-Treasurer Frank McKee, met to begin to prepare for a new round of bargaining in the copper industry. From the beginning the union position was clear. Despite the wave of concessions that had plagued the steel industry, the Steelworkers would hold the line in copper. On June 30, 1983, after months of stalled negotiations with industry leader Phelps Dodge, the Steelworkers had had enough. Frank McKee gathered the USWA team together:

> 'Alex [Lopez, chief negotiator for the local union], tell your people we're not getting anywhere,' said McKee. 'PD wants to try and bust us. Can you get your troops together?' Lopez looked over at [Angel] Rodriguez [local union president]. Of course they could get the troops together. Of course they could whip Phelps Dodge (Rosenblum 1995, 80).

Within a month's time, however, it was apparent that this was not going to be just another strike in which labor and management would engage in a ritual form of warfare. It would be an all-out war. Phelps Dodge was undergoing a massive corporate restructuring under President Richard Moolick and was struggling to find a new bottom line. The company had anticipated the strike and, relying on the manual *Operating During Strikes* developed by former GE executive and now Wharton School of Business professor Herbert Northrup, they had no intention of continuing pattern bargaining or conceding to the Steelworkers' demands.

Over the next several months Phelps Dodge brought in replacement workers and armed security guards and, when the workers and their union fought back, convinced the governor to bring in the National Guard. Unprepared for this level of warfare and with little experience with these tactics, the Steelworkers all but lost once the National Guard was brought in. Although the largely Mexican-American workforce fought bravely, by March 1986 the union was decertified. As Jonathan Rosenblum argues in his book, *Copper Crucible* (1995), this strike in a small New Mexico town, even more than the defeat at PATCO, was the struggle in which American corporations pioneered the aggressive anti-union strategy that would become a blueprint for breaking strikes and breaking unions in the decades that followed.

USX: The Steelworkers Fight Back

The loss to Phelps Dodge was devastating to the Steelworkers, who in many ways were already in free fall. Employment in steel had plummeted from more than 450,000 jobs in 1979 to 150,000 by 1987. The combination of foreign competition, badly outdated plants and equipment, unfavorable trade policies, and the resulting glut in the supply of steel left the industry paralyzed. Mirroring the industry, membership in the USWA dropped from 1.4 million in 1980 to just 680,000 by 1986 (Hoerr 1988).

Just as in copper, after thirty years of pattern bargaining the union would have to bargain individually with basic steel companies like USX.[1] They would also face an entirely different corporate structure

[1]All information on USX is drawn from Batchelor and Clark (1998) unless otherwise noted.

and model. As Batchelor and Clark explain, "Although US Steel was still the largest steel producer in the country, it found itself at the mercy of Wall Street, and scrambled to fend off several takeover attempts amid continued operating deficits and an increasing debt load" (Batchelor and Clark 1998, 10–11).

US Steel responded to this turbulence by diversifying, moving into the oil and gas industry through the purchase of both Marathon Oil and Texas Oil and Gas. By the summer of 1986, Chairman David Roderick announced a massive restructuring of the company, including a name change to USX. US Steel would now constitute only one of its four divisions.

Central to the union's bargaining strategy was an effort to force steel companies to open their books for union inspection. As USWA chief negotiator Bernie Kleiman recalls, "We had actually looked to a very significant degree into the inside workings for the first time of LTV, Bethlehem, National, Inland, and Armco . . . we were much more in the dark at US Steel and mostly US Steel just kind of laid in the bushes . . . " (Batchelor and Clark 1998, 27–28).

But the company held firm, refusing to disclose any financial information and adamantly insisting on outsourcing union work. In the middle of July the Steelworkers told the press, "The company has put on the table contract changes that would turn back the clock on workers' rights more than fifty years" (Batchelor and Clark 1998, 33). In a last ditch effort, thirteen hours before the contract was set to expire, the union offered to work under the terms of the old agreement, but the company locked them out.

During the first few months of the lockout, the company and the union conducted a public relations war as both sides tried to portray the other as the primary instigator of the conflict. Workers applied for unemployment compensation, which was handled differently by each state in which the 22,000 workers lived.

Even though the company had successfully stockpiled tons of steel, the main strategy of the USWA was to keep USX from shipping metal. Based on an agreement between the company and the union at the Lorain, Ohio, plant, no metal was shipped during the first two months of the lockout. In a good faith move, the USWA even agreed to help ship some metal that had been ordered before the lockout.

But by the end of November, the deal was off. USX decided to ship steel. More than six hundred union members assembled at the plant gate to block the first shipment. Late in the afternoon, just as union officials believed that the company had changed its mind, the trains began to move. The shipment was escorted by more than 170 police in full riot gear who attacked the locked-out workers. USWA District Director Frank Valenta had his nose broken and sustained a shoulder injury.

The local in Gary, Indiana, was no less militant. Early in September more than two hundred locked-out Steelworkers blockaded the main gate. Although forty-three were arrested, they were undaunted. They held their line, intimidating truck drivers willing to cross. As Christmas approached, the picket lines swelled.

This local pressure forced USX back to the bargaining table. An agreement was reached with the assistance of steel mediator Sylvester Garret. Although the union agreed to concessions, they were considerably fewer than those the company originally proposed, and the union won significant protections against contracting out, one of the primary issues in the campaign.

While the battle at USX did not represent a full-fledged strategic campaign, it was important for two reasons. For the first time the USWA saw the bargaining process as an information-gathering process to learn as much as possible about the internal workings of an individual corporation. Particularly in the face of an industry teeming with corporate mergers, takeovers, and reorganizations, it was no longer enough for the union to examine only its own strength as they had done, rather cavalierly, at Phelps Dodge. To move beyond concessionary bargaining, they would need to develop the expertise to identify which employers were truly in trouble and which companies were using economic conditions as a smoke screen for concession bargaining and union busting.

Second, the USX campaign also marked the first time in several decades that the Steelworkers moved outside the traditional legal responses to strikes and lockouts. Although direct action such as at USX was part and parcel of the Steelworkers' union in the 1930s and 1940s, it had all but disappeared as the union came to rely on the legal protections and the social compact between labor and management that had grown and solidified in the postwar era. Although direct action alone would not always prove to be sufficient, USX marked a paradigm shift in the organization, one that would later allow the development of many more sophisticated tactics in other campaigns.

Ravenswood: The Development of a Coordinated Campaign

When the Ravenswood Aluminum Company (RAC) locked out its more than seventeen hundred workers on October 31, 1990, it looked ominous for the Steelworkers.[2] Following the model pioneered at Phelps Dodge, Ravenswood management operated the plant from the first day of the lockout, literally bringing replacement workers in one door as their unionized workforce was leaving the plant by another. The woods surrounding the plant had been cleared, windows were boarded up, and the plant was heavily fortified by a chain link fence and an armed security force. The workers dubbed the plant "Fort RAC."

Over the next three months the Ravenswood lockout began to look more like another long drawn-out defeat for labor. For the USWA, who had watched their influence in the copper industry plummet with the loss at Phelps Dodge, it looked like aluminum might be next. President George Becker (then vice president) described his first visit to the plant three months into the lockout,

> I found that our people were sitting on a picket line with no effective means of putting the company under pressure whatsoever. Our members couldn't even picket in front of the plant. They were under an injunction. They could stand at the side of the road a mile from the gate and that was it. And I found at the time we had about eleven hundred scabs in the plant already. No way to slow them down. No way to stop them. No way to put pressure on them. I found that we had a lot of people fired and people

[2]All information on Ravenswood is drawn from Juravich and Bronfenbrenner (1999) unless otherwise noted.

> were generally afraid to do anything and were not doing anything. Simply said, nothing was being done that would be effective in pressuring the company to return to the bargaining table (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999, 68).

Despite the dismal outlook, Becker and the USWA decided to win at Ravenswood. They knew victory would take more than staffing picket lines and waiting for the wheels of justice to turn at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). It would not be enough to simply fight back as they had done at USX. Both RAC's reorganization and its bargaining strategy had revealed to the union that traditional loyalties and commitments had been tossed aside. The Steelworkers could not depend on RAC to play according to the old rules. The union tactics would need to change as well.

The Steelworkers knew that Ravenswood would require moving beyond the corporate campaign strategy pioneered by Ray Rogers at J. P. Stevens in the late 1970s, which focused primarily on pressuring corporate boards. Despite high hopes for Rogers' corporate campaign model, the Stevens' victory did not translate into a series of easy wins for labor. In the years that followed, unions began experimenting with a number of other tactics, including in-plant strategies, community coalitions, and more rank-and file involvement. Yet, individually none of these tactics proved to be labor's secret weapon. As the Steelworkers began organizing their campaign for Ravenswood, the consensus was emerging that all of these aspects would need to be involved in moving from a corporate to a more coordinated campaign model.

The Ravenswood campaign was built around several basic principles—extensive research, constant escalation of strategically targeted tactics, and the involvement of rank-and-file workers in all aspects of the campaign. The commitment to research was unprecedented. One of the mysteries in Ravenswood was how Emmett Boyle, a former plant engineer and manager who had left the plant when it was still owned by Kaiser Aluminum, returned a few short years later as the new CEO and a major shareholder of the now privately held company.

Boyle was hated by workers who watched him combine jobs, speed up production, and let safety conditions deteriorate to the point at which five workers had been killed in the short time he had owned the plant. Yet the Steelworkers did not make the mistake of earlier corporate campaigns by focusing exclusively on the obvious target. They understood that a strategic campaign needs to do more than just bring pressure to bear. It must direct that pressure toward those who have the power to settle.

The research conducted for the Steelworkers by the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO (IUD) discovered that Boyle was little more than a front man for forces in the industry that existed far beyond company headquarters in West Virginia. Over the next six months the Steelworkers and the IUD combed loan agreements and Emmett Boyle's divorce papers and gleaned whatever information they could from the unionized workforce. Everything pointed to Clarendon Ltd., a subsidiary of Marc Rich A.G., indicating that financier Marc Rich was ultimately in control of Ravenswood. Rich did not actually own Ravenswood but controlled it indirectly through a tangled web of loans, raw materials, and tolling agreements through which he bought and sold molten aluminum produced by others.

Rich was no ordinary metals trader. According to a former Citicorp oil expert, whether plundering state-owned businesses, violating trade sanctions, or making profitable metals trades with Chile's Augusto Pinochet or Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu, Rich and his partners "made a business out of doing business other people would not do," often operating in the shadows of the law (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999, 105). In 1983 the U.S. government issued a fifty-one-count indictment against Rich and his colleagues, charging them with racketeering, mail and wire fraud, tax evasion, and trading with the enemy, primarily for their violation of the U.S. oil embargo with Iran. Rich, who had transferred the ownership of his trading company to the newly formed paper corporation Clarendon, fled the United States, settling in Zug, Switzerland.

But the research did not stop with the connection to Rich. It continued throughout the campaign, identifying an ever-increasing number of areas where pressure could be applied. The campaign targeted beverage and can companies that purchased the finished aluminum can stock from RAC. Local union members waited with their cars gassed up to follow trucks maybe for a few hours or even a few days to identify where can stock was heading. They also developed a safety and health campaign based on years of meticulous records kept by Local 5668 Health and Safety Director Bill Doyle and the horrendous accident and death rate in the plant.

The basic operating principle of the committee was escalation. As Becker suggests,

> The last thing that I wanted that company, Emmett Boyle [and Marc Rich, and Willy Strothotte] to think of before he went to bed at night, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night . . . is all the problems and difficulties we caused them that day. And the first thing I wanted them to think of when they woke up is, 'Oh, Christ, I've got to go out and face them sons of bitches again. . . . ' We had to get them thinking about the Steelworkers continually, every day . . . if we let an hour go by that our name didn't cross their minds for some reason or another, then we were failing (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999, 132).

By the spring of 1991 the escalation began to pay off. A number of beverage companies, including Stroh's and Budweiser, stopped buying RAC metal; the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) ordered an unprecedented wall-to-wall inspection of the Ravenswood plant; and the NLRB issued a complaint against RAC. Success like this would have some unions feeling smug about their accomplishments. Yet, in an effort that distinguished their actions from many early efforts at coordinated campaigns, Becker and the USWA neither gave up nor slowed down the campaign. This was not a one-dimensional strategy but a multifaceted campaign: as one strategy cooled down, another would heat up.

The campaign soon developed far beyond the purview of most union contract battles. During the summer of 1991, the USWA took the campaign and the local union bargaining committee to Marc Rich's backyard. The Steelworkers linked up with the Swiss Metal workers union (SMUV), the International Chemical and Energy Workers (ICEF), and the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), and began what would be a series of trips to Europe. Through their research they had discovered that Marc Rich's empire depended on his ability to make deals in secret, and the last thing that Rich wanted was publicity. At this point Rich was beginning to move into Eastern Europe and hardly wanted his fugitive status to be highlighted.

Over the next several months the Steelworkers would travel to Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, France, and Romania and put up what USWA Organizing Director Bernie Hostein would call "a picket line around the world" (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999, 169). They met with bank officials who held loans on RAC and leafleted Rich's colleagues and competitors at high-level metals trading conferences with Marc Rich "Wanted" posters. They conducted street theater with oversized street puppets of Mother Jones (an early West Virginia labor heroine) and Marc Rich himself.

Local union members were actively involved in each of these trips to Europe. Perhaps the most novel aspect of the Ravenswood campaign was its linking of rank-and-file militancy and solidarity with the larger strategic goals of the union. In this way it contrasts sharply with many of the early corporate campaigns that tended to marginalize rank-and-file workers while some small group of staff or consultants planned and executed a high-level corporate strategy.

However important the larger union strategy, including the international campaign, the lockout could not have been sustained without the courage and dedication of the locked-out workers and their families. Most had worked in the plant since it first opened in the 1950s, and many came from mineworker families or were former mineworkers themselves. With an average age of 53, they were committed to their union and to each other. Throughout the twenty-month lockout, only seventeen of their seventeen hundred members crossed the line. Long before the international union had gotten involved, the local had set up a system to monitor plant activity by radio, boat, plane, and by tracking trucks. The local union built an assistance center to distribute strike funds according to need, which turned into a full-fledged food bank later in the lockout. Not a single worker went without food, lost their house or car, or was unable to pay their children's tuition bills for the duration of the lockout.

Early in the campaign the workers' wives had also set up a women's support committee, just as their predecessors had in Flint, Michigan, and Pittston Coal. While their locked-out husbands were enjoined from doing little more than symbolic picketing, the women's support committee stepped in. In addition to providing Christmas gifts for the children and food for union events, they snarled traffic in front of the plant, painted antiscab and anti-Boyle graffiti on barns and hillsides, and traveled across the country lobbying politicians and raising funds for their cause.

Local union officers and members were the core of the trips to Europe as well. The union realized that its best representatives were the locked-out workers themselves, and they received tremendous attention across Europe. They not only made the strategy more effective but also brought that strategy home to all the locked-out workers, their families, and the broader Ravenswood community.

By the spring of 1992 the combination of the research, escalating pressure tactics, and the continued solidarity and involvement of rank-and-file members had tightened the screws on Rich and Ravenswood Aluminum. OSHA had issued a several hundred-thousand-dollar fine, an environmental campaign was gaining momentum, can manufacturers continued to drop RAC metal, and Rich was prevented from making secret deals for a hotel in Romania and smelters in Czechoslovakia and Venezuela. Rich also lost his contract to supply copper to the U.S. Mint. The Mint contract, with one of the nations' top ten most-wanted white collar criminals, had prompted a congressional committee to launch an in-depth investigation into Rich's operations. International union actions were being planned by the USWA and labor allies in Bulgaria, Russia, Australia, Finland, Spain, Hong Kong, and Israel for May and June. The NLRB also would soon issue its decision on whether RAC had illegally locked out its workers, making it liable for millions of dollars in back pay plus interest.

By June a settlement was reached. Under the new agreement, the scabs and subcontractors would be dismissed, the health and safety issues would be addressed, and the cost of living adjustment would be maintained. There would be a wage increase of $1.25 over the life of the agreement and $2000 back pay for every worker. Most important, every one of the locked-out workers, except for two workers convicted of felonies, would return to the plant.

It was a tremendous victory not just for the Ravenswood workers but also for their union and the entire labor movement. Through a new model of comprehensive campaigns, the research, the escalating pressure tactics, and the full participation of the members and the broader community locally, nationally, and internationally, seventeen hundred workers in rural West Virginia and their union had taken on one of the most powerful venture capitalists in the world and won.

Bayou Steel: No Easy Replication

In the wake of the Ravenswood victory, the Steelworkers faced an equally tough adversary at Bayou Steel.[3] Bayou was one of the first minimills the Steelworkers organized and brought under contract, and it was extremely important to the union. But by 1993, as bargaining for the union's second agreement broke down, all was in jeopardy. Not unlike the situations at Phelps Dodge and Ravenswood, the USWA was now facing a company controlled by an investor group. Under the leadership of Howard Meyers, the group's primary goal was to restructure Bayou in a manner that would enhance financial returns to investors by expanding rolling capacity, refinancing the debt, and dramatically cutting labor costs.

The group's strategy was to force the union out on strike to either bring their wages and benefits in line with their nonunion competitors or break the union altogether. By the time the agreement expired on March 20, 1993, the company was bargaining backward, replacing wage gains with incentive pay, cutting back on overtime and healthcare benefits, and demanding a unilateral right to contract out work and layoff their workforce.

Learning from their slow start at RAC, the Steelworkers were anxious to get a campaign quickly under way. Within months of the walkout, the union committed extensive staff and financial resources and sent many of the same experts to Louisiana who had run and staffed the Ravenswood campaign. In essence, they simply transferred the Ravenswood strategy and machinery almost in its entirety to Bayou. Once in place, the strategy team quickly hit Bayou on every front: NLRB, OSHA, and environmental charges; truck-tracking and an end-

[3]All information on Bayou Steel is drawn from Seroka (1998) unless otherwise noted.

users campaign; shareholder actions; political action; and trips to Europe. The Ravenswood Women's Support Committee even traveled down to Louisiana to help the spouses of the striking Bayou workers set up their own women's support committee, the Hearts of Steel.

Just as in Ravenswood, the Bayou local threw themselves into the fight to save their union. As a newly organized unit in a fiercely right-to-work state, they were proud that 220 of the 300 workers in the bargaining unit were members of the union. At first, nearly all 220 union members and their families aggressively supported the strike. They were comforted and exhilarated by the support provided by the international union and the broader labor movement. Action by action, they watched their strategy wreak havoc on the company. OSHA citations, Environmental Protection Agency investigations, NLRB charges, the end-user campaign, and shareholder and SEC actions were clearly costing the company millions of dollars and seriously damaging their public image.

But each time the leverage appeared to be working and the union and company appeared to be close to settling the strike, Meyers responded in kind, putting something else on the table that he knew the workers and the union couldn't accept. The union had found ways to exert great pressure on Meyers, to get him to think about the union campaign "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday . . . ," but they still had not convinced him or the other Bayou investors that it was in their interest to allow the union back in the plant. Although the Ravenswood tactics were working on one level, they were failing to exert the pressure that they had on RAC and Marc Rich.

As we have argued above, an integral part of the victory at Ravenswood was the development of tactics and strategies that were rooted in careful research and a serious understanding of how power and decision making flowed in Ravenswood and its allied companies. But Bayou was a different company, with a different ownership structure, workforce, and labor history than Ravenswood. Thus, the strategies and tactics that the union so carefully honed at Ravenswood did not have the same impact when transferred to Bayou Steel.

Unlike Ravenswood, where the union had been in place for nearly forty years and where the workers lived in a homogeneous rural community steeped in the mineworker traditions of union militancy and solidarity, Bayou had only been under union contract since February 1986 and had only been in operation since 1981. In contrast to integrated steel or aluminum plants that need thousands of workers to produce their product, minimills such as Bayou are able to produce steel with many fewer workers. The location of the plant in southern Louisiana, with its mix of races, cultures, and union experience was also an important difference.

Meyers, too, had learned from the Ravenswood campaign. Rather than calling the scabs permanent replacements and thereby permitting the union to offer to return to work and transform the strike into a lockout, the company never fired the strikers except for those they charged with picket-line violence. Following a page out of the RAC playbook, in August 1995 Bayou filed a RICO suit naming the international officers, IUD staff, and local officials as coconspirators. Although the suit had no merit, it forced the union to devote extensive staff and financial resources to defend themselves, distracting attention and energy from the campaign itself.

The union continued to escalate the campaign but now moved more cautiously as, in the aftermath of the RICO suit, the union legal staff began to play a larger role. As the campaign dragged on, many of the outside experts moved on to other union struggles, and the Steelworkers began to rely more on their own staff. The campaign began slowly shifting beyond simply replicating the Ravenswood strategy to targeting Bayou's specific vulnerabilities—the ability of Meyers' group to refinance their debt, expand their rolling capacity, and sell stock.

By the fall of 1996, three and a half years into the strike, both sides were exhausted by the continued struggle, but the union had won some major battles. After months of pressure, that summer they forced the company to recognize the union at their new facility in Tennessee and they had made a highly successful trip to Europe where they reminded Meyers that they would follow him everywhere he tried to make new investments or expand his operations. Now, in September, the company faced the NLRB unfair labor practice trial and the potential for extensive negative publicity and massive back-pay liability.

On September 23, 1996, as the unfair labor practice trial opened in New Orleans, the company made a move toward a real settlement. By the end of the day the NLRB case was withdrawn and the contract was settled. The settlement was an important victory for the union after forty-two months, the longest strike in Steelworker history. Still, the victory at Bayou was by no means complete. As Seroka explains, "The incentive plan was still there. Members would be expected to contribute to future healthcare costs and the company was allowed to subcontract work, although with a very restricted list of positions" (Seroka 1998, 132–133). But the hardest thing for the returning workers to swallow was that the scabs would not be laid off, and sixty-five striking workers who had been discharged for picket-line activity, including union president Ron Ferraro, would have to arbitrate their return to work. The RICO suit was left standing and would not be settled until a year after the strike was over.

The Steelworkers, through the will of the international union and the solidarity of the rank and file, had held out at Bayou. But in a certain way they had forgotten the most important lesson of Ravenswood—the need to build a campaign from the inside out. In part, they were not able to do this at Bayou because when the campaign started they had yet to build the in-house capacity to run a Ravenswood-style campaign. They could replicate the Ravenswood strategy but they could not assume the Ravenswood workforce or the Ravenswood corporate vulnerabilities. To tailor the strategy to fit the workers, their community, and their company the way the union had at Ravenswood was much more difficult.

Bridgestone/Firestone: Out of the Ashes

By the end of the Bayou campaign the Steelworkers had dramatically increased their familiarity with and capacity to conduct sophisticated contract campaigns. Because so many Steelworker staff had been involved in multiple capacities in several of these campaigns, they now had the expertise to run the campaigns in-house. Many international staff representatives and district directors who were initially suspicious of the new strategies had gotten a taste of their effectiveness and had come on board. President Becker also dramatically restructured districts, moving aside some of those most resistant to the new models and new strategies.

Part of the increased capacity was not just to develop a single model for coordinated campaigns but, as the Steelworkers had learned from Bayou, to build campaigns that grew from a detailed understanding of each company and each workforce, and the recognition of the differences in each campaign. After Ravenswood and Bayou, the USWA also had to demonstrate that coordinated campaigns could be useful in settings other than huge industrial plants or in all-out wars with employers. If they were going to be truly useful as a strategic model, then coordinated campaigns would have to be applicable to collective bargaining in a host of different settings.

In the summer of 1995, still in the thick of the struggle at Bayou, the USWA took on an even more difficult challenge. The Steelworkers were not even on the scene when forty-two hundred members of the United Rubber Workers (URW) went out on strike against Bridgestone/Firestone in July 1994.[4] Although the 1991–94 master agreement between the URW and Japanese-owned Bridgestone/Firestone was celebrated by the industrial relations community as a model of labor-management partnership, by 1994 the company had joined other tire makers in what they secretly called the "War of '94," a comprehensive effort to break pattern bargaining in the tire industry and severely weaken the URW's power and influence.

Ten months later, in May 1995, faced with the harsh reality of hundreds of "crossovers"—twenty-three hundred permanent replacements—and a seemingly impotent national boycott, the URW called an end to the strike and made an unconditional offer to return to work under the terms of the company's final offer. That offer included severe wage and benefit cuts, twelve-hour days, seven-day workweeks, mandatory work on holidays at reduced pay, and a two-tiered wage scale. Bridgestone/Firestone responded by hiring back less than a quarter of the workforce, who were then forced to work surrounded by scabs, without benefit of a union contract.

Within months the URW merged with the United Steelworkers, who, as part of the merger agreement, had promised to finance and staff a full-blown comprehensive campaign to get all the striking workers back to work at Bridgestone/Firestone under a union agreement. If Ravenswood and Bayou seemed difficult, this appeared to be a virtually impossible task.

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[4]All information on Bridgestone/Firestone is drawn from Balfour et al. (2000) and Lessin (1998) unless otherwise noted.

The Bridgestone/Firestone strategy included targeting every plant and headquarters facility in the United States and abroad, as well as stockholders, major creditors, and international bodies such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Just as in Ravenswood, as part of their international strategy the union sent worker delegations to Japan to meet with labor, religious, and civil rights organizations. But this time, instead of just sending local union leaders and activists, the union decided to send along workers' families, including spouses and children as young as two years old. As USWA campaign coordinator Gerald Fernandez explained

> I wanted to put a human face to the strike. I wanted the Japanese to understand the suffering. I wanted the Japanese people and workers and unions to understand that they had essentially fired twenty-seven hundred people. . . . In these types of things you can't send officials of the union or paid professionals to do that kind of thing. You have to put a face to the struggle (Balfour et al. 2000, 45).

The USWA global campaign was not limited to Japan; delegations of workers and their families traveled to more than a dozen countries in Asia, Europe, and Latin America, and contacts were made in at least seventy more. The international campaign culminated in the summer of 1996, two years into the strike, in what the union called "International Days of Outrage." During a few short weeks, the USWA organized major demonstrations and job actions with their counterparts in Japan, France, Turkey, Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina. The Days of Outrage closed at the World Conference for the Bridgestone Corporation, organized by the Steelworkers just outside Bridgestone/Firestone's lavish headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee, where George Becker told the assembled crowd, "We intend to develop a global union workers' action plan to counter this company's growing disregard for its workers' interests, and its exploitation of the economies of both Third World and industrially developed nations" (Balfour et al. 2000, 71).

The union also brought pressure to bear on customers such as tire dealerships, automakers, local and state governments who had contracts with Bridgestone/Firestone, and racetracks such as the Indianapolis 500. It was a breathtaking agenda that could have only been undertaken with the experience of campaigns like Ravenswood and Bayou and the capacity the union had built in the process.

As in Ravenswood and Bayou, the union also filed massive health and safety, environmental, and NLRB charges. But, unlike in Ravenswood, at Bridgestone/Firestone a thousand union members had returned to work inside the struck plants, under conditions that some described as a "living hell," and thousands of other USWA members were working under extended contracts at Bridgestone/Firestone plants that were not part of the strike. So in addition to the external campaign, the union launched a full-scale in-plant campaign, replete with solidarity days, mass grievances, phone and fax jamming of corporate offices, and escalating work-to-rule actions and slowdowns. The scope of the combined internal and external campaign was staggering.

> [Three point six] million handbills, nearly a million 'Don't Buy Bridgestone/Firestone' stickers and bumper stickers, 250,000 campaign buttons, 115,000 small black flags, and 15,000 "Don't Buy" T-shirts were distributed; 63,000 yard signs were displayed. Thousands of separate campaign events involved over 60,000 USWA participants and volunteers; 1,100 separate USWA locals were actively involved. Camp Justice (the USWA solidarity campsite) was occupied for 246 days; the campaign reached 86 countries, including 16 visited by replaced Bridgestone/Firestone [workers]; and 43 foreign workers visited the U.S. to lend their support (United Steelworkers of America 1997, 14–15).

By November 1996 Bridgestone/Firestone had had enough. The union reached a tentative agreement, winning immediate reinstatement for all union members, including all but four of those discharged for strike-related misconduct, and major gains on almost every issue that had prompted the strike except for twelve-hour shifts and the elimination of paid hours for union health and safety work. Perhaps most impressive of all, the new contract would expire simultaneously with other master agreements in the industry. In the words of University of Akron professor and tire industry expert David Meyer, the union's accomplishment was "drop-dead, jaw-to-the-floor amazing" (Lessin 1998, 68).

As George Becker later would say, with Bridgestone/Firestone, on the heels of Ravenswood and then Bayou, the Steelworkers had proven to themselves, the labor movement, and corporate America, that they "knew what it takes to win" (Becker 1998). Still, the union steadfastly maintained that their goal was to do everything possible to reach an agreement without engaging in these kinds of all-out struggles. As their postcampaign report, "One Day Longer: The Road to Victory at Bridgestone/Firestone," stated, "We much prefer . . . to resolve our differences through negotiation. . . . But the real lesson here is that the best way to avoid a fight is to be ready for one. Real victory comes when you are too strong for your enemy to attack you. We must create situations in which companies recognize that they cannot destroy unions" (United Steelworkers of America 1997, 16).

From Wheeling Pitt to NIPSCO: Expanding the Scope of Strategic Campaigns

On October 1, 1996, just as the Bridgestone/Firestone campaign was coming to a head, another forty-four hundred Steelworkers went out on strike against Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel Corporation at eight mills scattered across the Ohio and Monongahela River valleys in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and southern Ohio.[5] The workers were striking to win back the decent benefit pension plan that they had lost eleven years before in the aftermath of concessions, bankruptcy, and a bitter 98-day strike. In the ensuing years, the company had come under the control of Ronald LaBow, a Wall Street bankruptcy specialist, who by the time of the strike had made Wheeling Pitt one of the most profitable companies in the industry, netting him more than $80 million in a few short years.

The Steelworkers went into bargaining in 1996 knowing that it would take a full-scale comprehensive campaign to win a defined benefit pension fund (a pension fund not tied to the ups and downs of the

[5] All information on Wheeling Pitt is drawn from O'Malley (1998) unless otherwise noted.

market) from LaBow. Until then almost all USWA campaigns had been reactive in nature, most starting up months into the campaign. This time, when bargaining at Wheeling Pitt broke off at midnight on October 1 with no agreement on the defined benefit plan, the union had a campaign plan ready to go, put together by the International's Strategic Projects department in conjunction with all eight of the Wheeling Pitt local unions.

Just as in Ravenswood and Bridgestone/Firestone, the key to the Wheeling Pitt strategy was a multifaceted approach that escalated pressure on Wheeling Pitt, its parent company WHX, and WHX subsidiaries across the country while keeping the striking workers at each of the plants committed to the strike. Striking Wheeling Pitt workers traveled the country picketing and handbilling outside company headquarters and WHX subsidiaries. Massive NLRB charges were filed, while religious leaders and national politicians weighed in to push LaBow back to the bargaining table.

Six months into the strike LaBow responded by shutting down four WHX plants, three of which were on strike. According to USWA Strategic Projects Director Ron Bloom, rather than having the intended effect of breaking the strikers' resolve, the plant closings "backfired" on the company, making them look "vindictive and nasty . . . they overplayed their hand" (O'Malley 1998, 58). In response, the union escalated the pressure, purchasing airtime on local radio and television stations featuring the personal stories of striking Wheeling Pitt workers and reaching out to each member of WHX's board of directors. The AFL-CIO weighed in as well: President Sweeney announced a "solidarity conference," inviting every central labor council and AFL-CIO affiliate in the three affected states to help "develop some new strategies to deal with Wheeling Pittsburgh and its CEO" (O'Malley 1998, 61).

By May 1997 Wheeling Pitt's stock had dropped from $10 to $6 a share, and the company reported quarterly net losses of more than $30 million. When LaBow still refused to budge, the union embarked on a nationwide "streets and suites" campaign that targeted the top ten institutional investors in WHX stock, including, among others, Merrill Lynch, Barclays Bank, Dewey Square, American Express, and Mellon Bank, and their CEOs. By June, LaBow was back at the table, for the first time seriously talking about pensions, and on August 1, 304 days after the strike began, he finally capitulated and agreed to the union's demand—a defined benefit pension plan in line with the industry standard.

It was a hard-won victory. It was not easy keeping four thousand workers out on what was really a one-issue strike, yet during all 304 days not one Wheeling Pitt worker crossed the line. As Ron Bloom explained, both the union and Ron LaBow had gambled, each day convinced that the other side would break first. In the end, according to Bloom, LaBow "anted up three hundred times and he lost three hundred times and then he said okay" (O'Malley 1998, 83).

That same summer of 1997, while the media and the public were focused on national strikes at United Parcel Service and Wheeling Pitt, the Steelworkers were gearing up for a very different contract battle at NIPSCO, the Northern Indiana Public Service Company.[6] Unlike their union counterparts at Ravenswood, Wheeling Pitt, Bayou, and Bridgestone/Firestone, the 3,562 service, maintenance, clerical, and technical employees of NIPSCO worked at a public utility, not a major industrial plant. Until 1988 their company had been a regional utility providing electric and gas services to residents of Northern Indiana. In 1988 that changed when NIPSCO was transformed into what management called "an energy-based holding company" (Clark and Hammer 1998, 8). By the time the union entered into bargaining in 1998, their utility plant was one of forty-eight different NIPSCO subsidiaries involved in everything from gas and electric services to rail freight, gas storage, commercial lighting, land acquisition, and real estate development. Under the new company structure, the ratepayers for the core gas and electric subsidiaries became the "cash cow" to finance the more risky capital ventures in real estate and land acquisition. If the ventures failed, the utility ratepayers were left to cover the losses. If they succeeded, the profits were put back into additional financial ventures or to line the pockets of the company's new owners and shareholders. In just a few years the new NIPSCO holding company had generated more than $400 million in excess cash, and its shareholders celebrated a 79 percent return on their initial investment (Clark and Hammer 1998, 10).

[6]All information on NIPSCO is drawn from Clark and Hammer (1998) unless otherwise noted.

Labor relations had also changed. At the same time utility rates were skyrocketing, staffing at the plant had been cut by more than 21 percent since 1992. Management came to the table in 1996 unbending on wage and staffing issues at the same time they refused to continue the longstanding practice of early negotiations and joint bargaining with the clerical and physical plant locals. Convinced that management could easily recruit a full complement of replacement workers and outlast any membership commitment to a strike, the local unions, with the advice of the International, decided to launch an alternative campaign. The workers would stay on the job, working without a contract, while the union would run a national comprehensive campaign against NIPSCO, targeting customers and shareholders.

The themes of the campaign focused on NIPSCO as the evil empire of Star Wars, with the union joining the customers as the "rebel alliance" fighting for justice. Over and over, in mailings, flyers, meetings, mass rallies, and an in-depth report entitled "Milking the Cash Cow," the campaign focused on skyrocketing utility rates, cuts in staff and service quality, the accumulation of excess cash by NIPSCO's owners, and how the owners and shareholders were lining their pockets at the expense of their customers and their workers.

Throughout, the campaign was defined in terms of corporate greed versus community and class, which resonated easily with the primarily working class NIPSCO customer base in northern Indiana. The union sought to shine a spotlight on the owners and shareholders, their greed and mismanagement, both at NIPSCO and other companies they owned, including the CEO of Welsh Oil and the president of Purdue University, both of whom were NIPSCO directors.

The union also pursued an inside campaign to hold workers together despite constant harassment from management day in and day out in the plants. The company had played on divisions between the primarily female clerical unit and the largely male physical plant unit, so the union made a priority of breaking down those differences and bringing the two groups together. To accomplish this, they brought in Robin Rich from the Steelworkers local at Bethlehem Steel. Rich had coordinated USWA solidarity for the Bridgestone/Firestone workers.

By early October it became clear to management that their attempts to undermine union solidarity had backfired and that the union was winning the war of public opinion with their customers. By mid-month the company came back to the table with a new agreement, including none of the eighty-five wage, benefit, and work rule concessions that had been included in their final offer when bargaining broke down four months earlier. The new agreement, which was easily ratified by the members on October 23, included major gains in wages and benefits, as well as a signing bonus.

Conclusion

Over the past decade there has been a rapid evolution of Steelworker coordinated and strategic campaigns. From the early campaigns at USX and Ravenswood, the Steelworkers have grown tremendously in their capacity to conduct successful campaigns as diverse as Bridgestone/Firestone and NIPSCO.

This evolution has not, however, reflected steady progress in a single direction, forging a unitary model for strategic campaigns. It has not been the evolution of a single, more-developed species. Instead, it might best be characterized by the evolutionary concept of generalized adaptation by which a less-specialized organism can survive in many different environments, in part because it is neither as vulnerable nor as inflexible as a more highly developed form.

Perhaps the most important observation that comes from this review of a half dozen Steelworker collective-bargaining campaigns is their diversity. After the Ravenswood victory, the USWA seemed assured that they had discovered the best model for strategic campaigns. Yet, as the near loss at Bayou showed, no single model was equally effective for every struggle. The Steelworkers learned, or relearned, from their experience at Ravenswood that the campaign had to follow the employer, the workforce, and the circumstances, not the other way around.

This shift marks a true evolution from the early use of corporate campaigns in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although the coordinated campaign may not be the magic bullet that some believed, the Steelworkers' experience demonstrates the continued relevance and effectiveness of these campaigns, even against rapidly evolving employers in a complex global economy. These were not simply lucky victories over weak employers. Facing the likes of Rich, Meyers, LaBow, and Bridgestone/Firestone CEO Yoichiro Kaizaki, the Steelworkers were up against some of the most powerful and ruthless individuals and organizations in the world. These victories have proven to both unions and employers that in today's economy in which corporate structures focus less on direct corporate ownership and more on a widening sphere of control, these new structures are not impenetrable to workers and their unions.

The USWA also did not win in only one type of setting; they won against large and small employers, with senior, stable workforces and new ones, and in industrial and service industries. Although we have not provided enough data points for a quantitative analysis, these six case studies strongly indicate the applicability of this overall model or approach across different kinds of employers, workplaces, and communities.

Continuing to refer to the Steelworkers' approach as a "model" for comprehensive campaigns may even be a misnomer. One of the major factors behind the continued success of the Steelworkers' campaigns was that they were not comprised of a series of tactics appended onto an existing union structure. Part of the maturation of the post-Ravenswood USWA was the realization that these coordinated campaigns were the building blocks and the very fiber of the union. Although the union strongly embraced the struggle at Ravenswood in an emotional and ideological sense, some years passed before they had actually gone through sufficient organizational change necessary to regularly engage in this level of campaign.

By the time of the Bridgestone/Firestone campaign, a struggle that few other unions would have had the courage to even try, the USWA had the institutional structure in place to make running and winning the campaign possible. By then it was no longer just George Becker and a few Steelworkers' staff trying to convince the rest of the union about the efficacy of this approach. The union now had the organizational commitment and machinery to make the campaign possible without the Herculean start-up costs and delays that had made Ravenswood so challenging. Although the union did learn important lessons about the nuts and bolts of these campaigns along the way, the real evolution was not in the technical aspects of coordinated campaigns but in the organizational and cultural change of the Steelworkers.

The changes were also not just organizational changes at the top. Part of the effectiveness of these changes was that they reverberated throughout the organization, into local unions and into the hearts and minds of local union members. Rather than moving away from the commitment, energy, and militancy of local union members, the coordinated campaign approach embraced their interests and depended on their active participation in building one union rather than layers of interest groups. As much as anything, these changes were about a return to basic values in the USWA and the courage to stand up for justice and dignity for rank-and-file workers.

Each of these victories went far beyond the industrial enterprise. The Steelworkers did not just save thousands of union jobs through their efforts, they changed the balance of power in collective bargaining across the steel, rubber, and aluminum industries. As the Steelworkers have reported in the aftermath of these hard-won victories, many employers came to the table ready to reach a fair agreement without going to war with the USWA.

As we found in our research, the union still has room to stumble along the way. The international union staff and officers coordinating the campaigns too easily start to think that their skills, experience, and ingenuity can supplant the need for full-membership involvement and participation in the campaign. They forget that the participation of the members, their voices, their stories, and their commitment is what inspires and generates support from other workers and allies around the globe. They also forget that no campaign strategy is worth anything if the members cross the line. Most of all, in the desire to win and win quickly, sometimes they forget the real issues that generated the struggles in the first place, and the true costs of some of the concessions necessary to get an agreement.

Despite these concerns, the Steelworkers' success provides tremendous hope for an American labor movement looking to rebuild and reshape itself. After enduring a decade of concessions in industries going through free fall, the Steelworkers have reestablished themselves as a force to be reckoned with at the bargaining table. Although they may have overreached in their initial efforts during which they courageously lunged at their opponents, clearly they have now matured organizationally to make these victories routine. Since NIPSCO they have gone on to win at Newport News, Continental Tire, and MSI, with similar campaigns under way at CFI, Titan Tire, and Kaiser.

There is much that can be learned from these campaigns, not just as it applies to the Steelworkers but to the entire American labor movement. As George Becker suggested in the aftermath of the Ravenswood victory:

> Struggles such as this renew the labor movement. The Ravenswood campaign demonstrated what it takes to win even where the employer is determined to bust the Union—perseverance, constant escalation of the battle, and a dogged determination not to quit no matter how bleak the circumstances may look. The labor movement must be constructive, creative, and ever willing to change but it must never, never forget how to fight (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999, 216).